

## 11.2.2007 - Mountain Music

West Virginia

has an incredibly rich and unique musical tradition. From the earliest settlers to Brad Paisley today, West Virginia's music and musicians have played an integral role in the cultural heritage of our state.

Mountain music is a tradition that most of us in southern West Virginia have enjoyed our entire lives. Many of us grew up around it, at Granddaddy's feet while he strummed the banjo, in the laps of our mothers as they sang us to sleep, by the fire with family on Christmas morning, and inside our churches in jubilation.

While the tradition of making mountain music continues today, we cannot forget the rich past from which it came.

Nowhere is West Virginia's unique musical history apparent more than in our-not one-but three state songs, each representing the historical periods in which they were written.

"The West Virginia Hills," was completed by Ellen Ruddell King and Henry Everett Engle with the help of an unnamed 1-year-old boy, in 1885. "West Virginia, My Home Sweet Home" was composed by Col. Julian G. Hearne, Jr., a Wheeling native, attorney, and distinguished World War II veteran, around 1947.

The third song, "This Is My West Virginia," was written by Charleston jazz musician Iris Bell and named the official Centennial Song of West Virginia in 1962. All three songs were declared official and equal by the State Legislature on February 28, 1963.

By investing in musical education, research, and new musical venues, we can introduce the world to the sound of West Virginia's front porch hospitality. Learning and listening to our music, full of faith, family, and a love for our West Virginia hills, is a great way to experience some of America's most compelling and heartfelt music.

From Blind Alfred Reed to Kathy Mattea, West Virginia is the birthplace of many a cultural icon and, as a state, we love to showcase our musical heritage with festivals like the Meadow River Bluegrass Festival, in Rainelle, or the

Appalachian String Band festival, in Clifftop, WV.

In addition to being home to Senator Robert Byrd's famous fiddle, the West Virginia Music Hall of Fame provides a series of traveling exhibits to communities and schools, highlighting the different eras of West Virginia's musical heritage.

Today, West Virginia's mountain music is enjoying a renaissance across the country and the time is ripe for southern West Virginia to make the most out of state's musical riches.

Together with the West Virginia Humanities Council I have been working on a new Mountain Music Heritage Project and Center, which will work to preserve the musical heritage of West Virginia. It is my hope that our mountain music will take its rightful place alongside the rest of our nation's rich musical heritage and that ears will be opened to the resonant, relevant messages tucked between the bars of these beautiful melodies.

As Hazel Dickens, a living legend and talented daughter of West Virginia, famously sang, "the green rolling hills of West Virginia are the nearest thing to heaven that I know." Her lyrics are close to our hearts and remind us of the importance of honoring our musical heritage for all to enjoy.

Hazel's legacy will be preserved for future generations when our efforts to create a Mountain Music Center are completed.

The Congress recently passed legislation designating October as National Country Music Month. While West Virginia's mountain music deserves a category all to itself, country music contains themes that are uniquely American and sing to the heart and soul of the everyday West Virginian. It is about the ups and downs of daily life, the joys of raising a family, and the struggles facing our nation. These themes are exemplified gloriously through the gifted songwriting of our country music artists.

It is fitting that we dedicate the month of October to honor the musical heritage of our country and our state. This, my friends, is music to my ears, and I hope it is music to yours

as well.